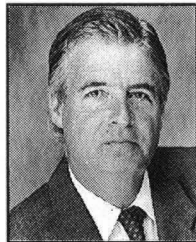


JOURNALISM EDUCATION

U.S. example an ominous warning to Canadian educators

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The search committee at Western asked me in 1981 for my definition of a great journalism school. Not knowing anything about journalism education at that time, I replied, "A school that produces great journalists, of course." The committee of academics didn't appear to appreciate that simple answer.

More than a decade later, I find myself returning to that quick, intuitive response. The fact is, we don't produce many great journalists, at Western or elsewhere in the journalism education business. But neither do other professional schools create greatness, although occasionally they may stumble across it.

I once asked the head of U.W.O.'s fine arts faculty how many potentially great artists were produced every year. "Perhaps one," she answered honestly, "if we're lucky."

The dean of the music faculty gave the same sort of response. We'll gladly take credit for the few great artists, musicians and journalists that have passed through our hands but in our heart of hearts, we know that we did little but get out of their way.

So if producing another Hemingway isn't the criterion, what is?

In a practical sense, the question is pointless because journalism education has reached the stage where it justifies itself. In other words, we're never going to return to an era of newsroom apprenticeship where journalism is taught by old editors to young reporters.

Journalism education as a university discipline started in the United States in the 19th century, spread to Canada in the 1940s and is now proliferating in Europe, Asia and the developing world.

Whether or not journalism schools are producing great journalists, they are now an integral part of journalism. About half of the new hirings in Canadian newsrooms are journalism graduates and the proportion is bound to increase, if the U.S. experience is any guide.

Although we can't create talent, journalism educators can nurture and support it. We can provide it with the techniques and tricks of self-expression. We can attempt to compress generations of professional experience into a year of two of formal instruction.

If you look at the curricula of journalism schools anywhere in the world, you can see that there is a remarkable consensus on how to do this. We all regard reporting as the basic skill; we call create simulated newsrooms so that students can learn by doing; we all provide instruction in journalism history, ethics, media law and public affairs before branching out into individual variations on the standard curriculum.

Most of us have learned that the customer, the news media

industry, isn't always right. In the early 1980s, editors of Canadian newspapers discouraged schools from investing in computers. Typewriters are fine for teaching the basics, said this generation of type-writer-reared journalists.

Only a few years later, their successors were demanding computer-literate graduates.

Journalism educators have to walk a fine line between providing editors and news directors with a product that they recognize — clones of themselves — and producing graduates who will bring something new to journalism because they've been

taught to question and challenge accepted ways of doing things.

Innovation requires journalism educators who understand that teaching is not simply a by-product of journalism practice. There will always be an important place in the schools for experienced professionals who teach by example in workshops that replicate real-life newsrooms.

But journalism faculties that become retirement homes for older journalists are dead ends for instructors and students alike. Journalism education is a specialized field that requires young men and women who have added teaching and research skills to their professional backgrounds.

Of course, journalism schools such as ours that attempt to follow this ideal soon begin to feel the dead hand of academia trying to squeeze the life out of them. But maintaining vitality and creativity in a bureaucratic administrative structure isn't a problem peculiar to universities.

It's worrisome that the society where journalism education began and where it has reached its fullest development — the United States — is also a society characterized by political alienation and a lack of trust in all major institutions, including news media.

It is the graduates of several thousand U.S. journalism schools who have made American news media what they are today, with deteriorating newspaper circulations, declining audiences for network television news and a mania for marketing that has substituted popularity for significance and relevance.

Neither the graduates of U.S. schools nor their mentors apparently have been able to successfully withstand or even effectively criticize the commercialization and political manipulation of U.S. news media.

Not all the generously endowed journalism research and training institutes in the United States have succeeded in rising above the system to define meaningful new directions for American journalism and a new idealism for American journalism students.

The U.S. example is both an ominous warning for Canadian journalism educators and a challenge to re-examine the history and achievements of our own news media, to define and reinforce their special strengths, and to make sure that we handle the great journalists who do show up in our classrooms from time to time with care and respect.